BELFAST GOVERNMENT SCHOOL OF ART,

COLLEGE SQUARE NORTH.

HEAD MASTER'S REPORT.

I BEG to submit my first Report, which is a review of the operations of the Belfast School of Art for a period of rather less than a year. Though, in a certain sense, our School is regarded as a resuscitation of a former institution, virtually it must be judged by its own actions as a new school, for it has no principles of the elder establishment to guide its management, and, happily, no traditions of obsolete practice to fetter it.

The scheme of tuition has been framed in general conformity with that of the Central Institution, South Kensington. It has been necessary to adopt this course up to a certain point to obtain the Government aid; but in all particulars care has been taken to pursue the best methods which experience has hitherto sanctioned. It must be understood, therefore, that we are not trammelled by any inflexible regulations, and I never hesitate to vary the course, to facilitate the labours of the student, and to make the work interesting and intellectual.

The attendance throughout the year has been very considerable, 441 students having joined the various classes. This is highly satisfactory; but now that more is known of the system which we have adopted, and as the present students have shown such excellent progress, I anticipate for the future even a much larger measure of success.

Considering the very short time, only about six months, during which the School had been in operation, prior to the period of the Second Grade Examinations in May, the results are most satisfactory, and highly encouraging; and the works also of the more advanced students, which were sent to the Competition of Schools in the previous month, were successful beyond my expectations, creditable alike to the students and the School.

I have some hesitation in placing our results in juxtaposition with those of other schools, but it is only by such comparisons that our place among such institutions can be estimated. I find, then, that Sheffield, the second Provincial School in the Three Kingdoms, according to its last report, sent up for twelve months, 2,669 works, while we, for about half that term, presented 1,500 by the artisan class alone; besides which, there were nearly as many more, the work of the pupils of the day classes. With respect to the Second Grade Examinations, upon referring to the last official report (1871), I find that only three Provincial Schools received a greater number of

awards, viz.:—Birmingham, with 1,007 students, gained 219 awards; Glasgow, with 1,003 students, 139 awards; and Bristol, 134 awards; while Belfast has secured 132, which includes the high proportion of 29 prizes. In that class of studies, grouped by the Government in its Science Department, as Building Construction and Machine Drawing, we have also been fortunate, nine out of the twelve students who sat having been successful. With respect to the examinations I have spoken of, the same sets of papers are used for all students, so as to have a uniformity of test: the trial, however, is not competitive. In addition to these tests of one to four hours each, the best works of the advanced students, upon which have been bestowed much time and attention, are sent to London in April to compete for prizes. Short as the time had been for the training requisite to qualify pupils to enter upon this competition, it is most gratifying to find that their diligence and ability have secured for them eleven Third Grade Prizes. and a National Bronze Medal has also been taken for designs.

The results of the Examinations are the only really tangible proofs we can give of the work of the School, and these are certainly of a kind to justify strong hopes for the future. But as yet, all we have done must be regarded as simply evidence of indispensable preparations for comprehensive art study, and its consummation in artistic production.

We are much indebted to the promoters of the local scheme of prizes, which is already exerting a great influence, and cannot fail to give specific direction to the studies of the pupils. The designs now in course of production promise well; still it would be most unfair to students to expect to find in their works the brilliancy of invention, or the extensive technical knowledge of practised designers. But our competitive designs should at least display a nice perception of the beautiful, in the selection of forms, and good taste in their arrangement.

The Science and Art Department has kindly lent us a number of excellent works, such as Etchings, Photographs, &c., all tending to aid the student who cares to advance himself. But what we are most in need of is a Local Museum for the exhibition of all classes of art production, and particularly such as would bear upon the manufactures of our own town. Something has already been done to this end, the Committee for Local Prizes having obtained a number of specimens and drawings of damasks and printed goods.

Without joining in any of the alarmist cries about foreign competition, we have ample evidence of the great advantages possessed by artisans of whom the majority have a specific training in drawing, and other kinds of knowledge applicable to their several crafts. Indeed, it is only by such that the *mere mechanic* is raised to the position of an *art workman.*

It is on this account that as yet certain fields of design are almost monopolized by foreigners, and if they display a purer and finer taste so much the better. But I doubt if there is not much of fashion in the matter, which a juster appreciation of excellence would correct. Moreover, we have in some departments an acknowledged superiority over our foreign rivals, as evidenced in this year's International Exhibition, and if we determine to support and effectively carry on this and kindred institutions, our countrymen, I am sure, need feel no more apprehension of failure in artistic than in any other field of productive industry.

In addition to this Report, I would venture to make some further remarks in order to apply our experience of the past to the possibilities, and I hope, too, to the probabilities of the future.

With respect to the tests applied by the Department of Science and Art to the work of students, and which necessarily determine most of the elementary drawing practised in the school, I feel warranted in saying that the training such tests necessitate is sound and useful. It will always be distasteful to many pupils who have passed through an educational course—and, perhaps, with distinction—to have to submit to sit, so to speak, on the lowest form, and begin with the very rudiments of drawing. And it is even more trying to the pupil who has trifled a little with the pencil, but who has had no regular culture, or who has been taught, perhaps, in a loose way, to be asked to study outline, in order to gradually acquire the perception to recognise form correctly, and the facility of hand to represent it. But in the sister Art of Music, no matter how nicely a person may sing by ear and imitation, if true vocalization is to be attained, the teacher insists upon a long course of sol-fa exercises; and however wearisome they may be felt at first, the power they impart and the confidence they inspire are appreciated by every pupil ultimately. And so, while it is our practice to give every one the full benefit of real acquirements, we feel that it is both inexpedient and unjust to sanction attempts at the advanced branches before a sound foundation has been established. I may here remark that, while a large proportion of our scholars has not been taught previously, or, in some instances, taught very superficially, a few have possessed considerable attainments; and with such it has been a source of great satisfaction to the teachers to stimulate their laudable ambition, and guide it to worthy objects.

In its higher studies, our school offers scope for any variety of production, from designing, ornament, and decoration—for everything in which beauty can appropriately be associated with utility—to sketching freely and boldly from nature, and to the nobler work that, in some of its many forms, every one imbued with the true artistic spirit aspires to accomplish.

We experience the same difficulty that I find matter of general complaint in art schools—that, while a select number enter without a murmur on the graduated course of instruction pursued in the school, many are impatient, and desire to start at once with water-color drawing and oil painting. Now, if any who are so eager to paint, before they have really learned to draw, would make themselves acquainted with the career of those who have achieved even moderate success, it would be found that none have been able to evade the necessary laborious preliminary study; and even when persons of great natural talent have had the temerity to despise some of the branches of study of apparently minor importance, how often have they deplored their neglect when too late to repair the deficiency; and how frequently do we find the pleasure with which we contemplate fine works of art marred by blemishes, only to be attributed to defective training. In nothing is this so conspicuous as in drawing—a composition shall be tasteful, and the coloring harmonious, but the figures be as misshapen as cripples. It is better, therefore, to insist upon a good elementary education in outline from the flat and models, and shading in chalk or sepia from the